Alignment Between the Welcoming Universities Standard and the Higher Education Threshold Standards Reform

Context

On 13 July 2026, the Australian Government amended the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) to introduce new requirements for universities to prevent and respond to racism and strengthen governance within the higher education sector. A comparison between the HESF and the Welcoming Universities Standard follows.

Areas of Strong Alignment

1. Preventing and Responding to Racism

The strongest area of alignment is with HESF Standard 6.4, Preventing and Responding to Racism. This standard requires institutions to maintain safe and inclusive environments, address systemic and interpersonal racism, establish appropriate policies and procedures, support equity and diversity, and engage affected communities in institutional decision-making.

The Welcoming Universities Standard addresses these requirements through indicators relating to:

- cultural safety (1.1, 1.2, 4.1)
- anti-racism initiatives (2.1)
- culturally responsive policies (2.0)
- representation and participation (2.0, 3.0)
- community consultation (1.2, 4.1)
- equity and diversity practices (1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0)
- transparent complaints processes (2.1)

2. Student Wellbeing, Safety and Belonging

The HESF requires providers to foster safe learning environments, provide adequate support services and ensure effective complaints mechanisms.

The Welcoming Universities Standard includes indicators addressing:

- culturally safe environments (1.1, 1.2, 4.1)
- transition support (2.3)
- inclusive student services (2.0, 3.4, 4.1)
- social connection and belonging (1.0, 3.1, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2)
- community participation (4.0)
- faith and cultural inclusion (1.0, 2.0, 3.4, 4.1)
- online safety (4.1).

3. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The HESF requires providers to support equity and diversity among both students and staff. Recent amendments also introduced specific expectations that staffing policies support diversity and inclusion.

The Welcoming Universities Standard includes indicators relating to:

- inclusive recruitment practices (2.2, 3.4)
- staff development (1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 4.1)
- leadership accountability (1.0, 2.1, 3.4)
- diverse representation (1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0)
- workforce inclusion (1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0).

4. Consultation and Participation

HESF Standard 6.10 requires universities to consult with students, staff and other stakeholders and create meaningful opportunities for participation in governance and decision-making.

The Welcoming Universities Standard includes requirements for:

- stakeholder consultation (1.2, 4.0)
- co-design approaches (1.1, 1.2, 3.3, 4.0)
- representation in decision-making structures (2.2)
- partnerships with diverse communities (1.1, 1.2, 3.2, 4.2)
- ongoing engagement mechanisms (1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0).

5. Continuous Improvement and Quality Enhancement

The HESF emphasises quality assurance, monitoring and continuous improvement processes.

The Welcoming Universities accreditation framework requires:

- evidence collection
- assessment against indicators
- implementation monitoring
- external review
- reaccreditation.

Where the Standard Adds Value Beyond HESF Compliance

Belonging and Social Cohesion

The HESF primarily regulates minimum standards regarding safety, equity and support.

The Welcoming Universities Standard introduces broader concepts, recognised within higher education best practice and evidence-base including:

- belonging
- cultural humility
- intercultural literacy, knowledge and communication skills
- social cohesion
- community connectedness.

Support for Diverse and Emerging Student Cohorts

The Standard explicitly considers the experiences of:

- international students
- refugee-background students
- migrants
- culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- religious minorities.

Community Engagement

The Welcoming Universities framework extends beyond the institution itself and considers the university's role within its wider community through:

- partnerships
- civic participation
- place-based inclusion
- community access and engagement.